

# Girls

I had three sisters. The eldest one treated me like a science experiment when I was about eight years old. She was a nursing student and took me into the hospital where she worked and arranged for me to have “sun ray lamp” treatment. This meant getting me to lay under an ultraviolet lamp for some time on a regular basis. The ultraviolet rays were supposed to fix my pigeon-chestedness but they probably had no effect other than to give me a complex about my pigeon-chestedness.

The other two sisters were still living at home and I had to share a bedroom with them. I hated that. I suppose they hated that too but we were a poor family and had to cope. The middle sister and the younger sister had to share a bed.

I had a rubber sheet because of bedwetting and was always told that I should not watch horror films because somebody somewhere had decided that I was “of a nervous disposition”. I had never seen a horror film so I don’t know whether I would have liked them but I could always hear the late night television programmes which my mum and dad had on in the other room. Twilight Zone, One Step Beyond, The Boris Karloff Mystery Hour, The Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Hour, etc.

When I was five I decided that I was “in love” with a little girl the same age as me at school. I made the mistake of telling the middle sister and her friend (they were about 15) that I had fallen in love. They fell about laughing in hilarity. There I was, a five year old, talking about being “in love” with another five year old. It was the funniest thing they had ever heard! I was crushed and I never admitted to liking girls again until I was 19.

Another 12 year old girl pushed me into a thorn bush when I was five or six. I have a vivid memory of the gigantic 12 year old girl pushing me repeatedly into that thorn bush and saying “Go on in there LITTLE boy! THAT’S where you’ve got to go! In there, in there, in that thorn bush! And stay there for ever and ever!

When I was around fourteen/fifteenish sort of age in secondary school the teachers were trying to make us grow up faster than was natural for some of us. We were all growing at our own pace but the teachers, being part of an extended concept of the civil service, were trying to standardise it. They seemed to think that if some boys were becoming hairy and flirting with the girls then all of the boys should be doing the same. Of course it’s highly likely that the teachers’ attitude was driven by homophobia. We all continued developing differently to each other and the system continued trying to impose an impossible conformity upon us. I had a bicycle by then so I did a paper round seven days a week and my younger sister copied me and got her own paper round. Having a bicycle also meant I could cycle far far away and escape from the girls.

I thought of them as the ugly sisters from “Cinderella”. I don’t honestly know how ugly they were, probably not ugly at all in appearance but ugly to me, subjectively, in their nagging. I was never able to convince them that a person reading a book wishes to be left in peace to read.

The eldest sister had moved away and so I didn't have to go for the ultraviolet lamp treatment any more. A few years later that type of treatment was discredited and discontinued amid worries that it might cause cancer. The middle sister was going out with a Teddy Boy who was an absolute thug. The youngest sister was growing up quicker than me and had started sometimes wearing one of those jokey 1960s badges which were trendy at the time "I'm Virile" it said. I tried to persuade her not to wear it but she wouldn't be told. She had also begun telling lies to impress people and I hated that.

When I left school at fifteen and got a job as an office boy in Fleet Street the youngest sister was thirteen and hanging around with the boys of the new "peanuts" fashion ("Peanuts" was a transitional phase between bubblegum rock and skinheads). When I was sixteen she and her friend pleaded with me to go and meet the famous person they'd found in a nearby block of flats.

"Please come with us to see Jeff Beck" they insisted.

"Who the heck is Jeff Beck?" I said.

"He's a famous guitar player," they said.

"Well I've never heard of him" I stated quite truthfully, "So he can't be as famous as all that". Eventually I agreed to go up to the umpteenth floor of the high rise block and meet this so-called "guitarist". The story turned out to be true and Jeff Beck did actually live there and was genuinely a well known guitarist but well known to a slightly older age group than me. In the conversation I let slip the information that I was only sixteen and that the girls were both thirteen. This revelation did not go down well. Neither did the fact that I'd never heard of Beck before.

"Who do you listen to then?" I was asked.

"Donovan," I said.

To my astonishment, a few months later, Donovan released a record with Jeff Beck! I guess he was fed up with not having his name in big letters on the label.

I continued to develop at a slower pace than other teenagers. Going through puberty belatedly. When I eventually tried to be a normal heterosexual my relationships were very sad and I've written about that in other pieces of this book.

By the time I got to thirty I was pretty much sure that the whole love and romance thing wasn't for me and I was equally sure that I was neither gay nor really heterosexual. Something else, something different. The world wasn't really using the word "asexual" in this context yet but the idea of it was in the air.

When I was protesting against fur coats at the Miss UK beauty contest the bouncer was beating me up and I heard him say to someone, by way of justification for his excited punching of the side of my head, "He's trying to get at the girls!"

I wanted to contradict this statement but I was too busy lapsing into unconsciousness. When I moved from London to Glastonbury in the early 1980s I worked as an unpaid volunteer in the cafe of the Assembly Rooms and lived in 7a The High Street, upstairs from a shop called "Gothic Image" and next door to the 15th Century Glastonbury Tribunal.

Once again I decided that I was in love and once again it was necessarily non-physical. Nevertheless, non-physical romantic infatuation is a genuine emotional state which really matters to the person experiencing it. This romantic idea centred around a young woman called Carla and I'm sure she found it to be both confusing and amusing. At one stage she braided my hair with rainbow ribbons in a bit of a Boy George style.

On another occasion Carla was a bit annoyed that our evening together at the pub ended with me saying that I'd better go to bed because I had to be up early for work in the morning. One of Carla's friends, Stephen Clarke, remarked that I was mad. He wasn't the only one who thought so. I used to get a lot of comments like that.

In April of 1984 Princess Diana visited Glastonbury to take part in the opening of a work space for artists and the High Street was lined with monarchist sycophants cheering. I wrote "Ban Fox Hunting" in large letters on a bedsheet and hung it out the window, placed loudspeakers in the bay windows facing the High Street and played the Sex Pistols record "God Save the Queen and her Fascist Regime" at full volume as her car passed underneath. The shopkeepers from downstairs were begging us to stop.

Another time, in 1985, I was trying to get to sleep in my room (work in the morning again) and there was a party going on out on the landing with people from all the other flats. I had made the mistake of not locking my door.

A woman called ummm, Amy or something, I think.... Ummm, No... Emma! That's right. She was called Emma. A woman I'd never met before came sheepishly tiptoeing into the room. She moved in a little dainty furtive manner and said she was hiding because she'd broken up with her boyfriend Dean.

I knew Dean slightly and I knew that he was always with a different girl every time he came round to the flats. I agreed to let Emma sleep alongside of me and assured her that I wouldn't bother her.

We lay there trying to sleep and talking, and there were voices of Carla and Katherine Aherne, an Australian who was another of the building's residents, listening outside the door and saying things like "There IS someone else in there! There is! He's got someone else in there with him!"

It sounded as though a small crowd was gathering to see what Carla and Katherine were talking about.

Then Dean burst into the room, turned on the light, kicked me several times in the head, then marched out again leaving us to be quizzed by everyone at the party about what was going on. When I muttered something about being kicked in the head Emma said "Well, I came in for some of that as well you know!"

I still had to go to work in the morning but I didn't get much sleep. At one stage I was talking to Dean. We argued and he apologised. The peace making process wasn't helped much by Debbie Soley who, like me, worked at the Children's World charity. She was actually winding up the argument a notch, trying to make more of it, and seemed excited by the conflict. At

one stage she placed her hand on Dean's chest and her other hand on my chest. Annoyed by this gesture I took a step backwards.

Meanwhile Emma had gone with Robert Coon, author of "Elliptical Navigations Through the Multitudinous Aethyrs of Avalon", an American who lived in the next flat along the landing and she spent the night there. They became a couple from that night onwards. A few months later Emma gave birth to a child. Yet another courtship dance that I had failed to understand. Various people came and went from the flats at 7a.

I moved from a room at the back to a room at the front. Carla moved out to Northload Street. A headbanger called Stephen Davey moved from the floor below up into Carla's old room and with him came his new girlfriend "Tabby".

Katherine began to hang around the corridors of the building, leaning petulantly on walls in the style of Lili Marlene and repeating the words "Candy. Candy. I want Candy!" I think "Candy" was the name of some girl that she knew. Some friends of mine from London, Alby and Alex, visited and Alex wanted to know who this "Candy" was. I didn't know. But then I seldom know what's going on. I generally decided either that they were "All raving mad!" (in the voice of Tony Hancock) or that they were all out of their heads on some unidentified drug. Possibly both.

One Christmas morning Lizzy, from across the landing, came into my room dressed in lingerie wished me a Merry Christmas, talked to me for a few minutes and then, realising that I wasn't going to respond the way a heterosexual would've, wandered off out of the room again leaving me to read my book.

In 1987 when Steve murdered Tabby everyone in the building and surrounding area was, of course, traumatised. We all had to somehow find ways of getting over it and moving on with our lives.

In the summer I was working for Arabella Churchill on the Glastonbury Festival out at Pilton. Arabella gave us some jobs to do and when they were completed she told us to go and enjoy the festival. I can't honestly say that I enjoyed it much though.

In August we had the "Harmonic Convergence".

I went up on Glastonbury Tor that day and saw all the spiritual New Age types gathering to feel the cosmic vibes.

On the Tor I walked around with walkman headphones on and I was listening to a Depeche Mode album "People are People". My bit of Irony.

After that, when everybody was nicely harmonically converged, I moved to London to do a one year course at Central School of Speech and Drama. The Sesame course.

On the course there were 14 students, eleven of whom were women and three were men. All of the tutors except one were women. There was much talk of feminism but in a different way to the feminism of the 1960s and 70s.

In the 60s the great conformist barriers were being broken down. It became OK for men to have long hair and for women to wear trousers.

In the 70s men were allowed to be soft and sensitive while women were allowed to be hard and ambitious.

In the 80s it went a bit weird with some feminists espousing matriarchy while others kept trying to recreate the prejudices and conformities of the 1950s so that they could relive the breaking of those barriers again and again. On a couple of occasions I heard women declare that the word "male" contains "mal" which means "bad". When I replied to this that "female" also contains "mal" but with a "fe" attached they were not impressed. It just seemed as though feminism was going through a rough patch, losing its sense of direction and this coincided with Britain being led by a Queen and a female Prime Minister.

Thatcher was a feminist hero but not the one that many women had hoped for. I was studying on the Sesame course for a year, knowing that I wasn't going to get the certificate at the end but continuing to complete the course anyway.

When it was over I decided to move back to Somerset and do some volunteer work at Heaven's Gate Animal Sanctuary at West Henley near Langport. I got a train to Bristol Temple Meads and then the Badgerline 376 bus to Street.

Arriving in Street, I phoned up the animal sanctuary and they sent a car out to pick me up. When the car arrived it was driven by a cheery woman who said "You'll like it working at the sanctuary. Lots of nice GIRLS for you!" My heart sank. Why were they giving me "girls" for chrissake?

And so it goes on. Even in 2013, when I was 60 and I was working as a customer service advisor for a Sitel call centre, a supervisor who liked to address the female customer service advisors as "chick'n" took one look at me and she scathingly breathed the word "girls!" and glared at me as if I were some kind of Casanova. Why? What the hell have I, as an asexual person, ever done to deserve that?

There are many mysteries and puzzles which are beyond my understanding.